

The Beginning and End of the
Roman Revolution as Represented by
Tiberius Gracchus and Marcus Tullius Cicero

Creative Component

by

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The second century B.C. brought with it a change in Rome's long standing policy against annexation. The Senate (which determined all Roman foreign policy at that time) opposed territorial annexation and the accumulation of power by any other foreign country. For instance, by approximately 200 B.C. both Macedon and Carthage suffered tremendous defeats by Rome.¹ However, both territories were left unoccupied in hopes that each might establish some sort of peaceful coexistence with Rome. Unfortunately, neither Carthage nor Macedon appreciated this chance for political self-determination. Both eventually reverted to hostile ways and the following generation saw one faction after another appeal to Rome for protection or assistance. Yet these client-states of Rome refused any advice not administered by force.

Rome was drawn ever further into the situation just to maintain peace and stability. This intervention culminated in 146 B.C. with Rome's destruction of Carthage and the Greek city of Corinth.² In both instances, Rome maintained an outdated state policy of self defense in which security was best obtained by elimination of all opponents. Rome had all but achieved this feat some years prior with its defeat of Hannibal. However, Rome never stopped to measure its own strength in comparison to the rest of the world. Rome did not yet appreciate the implications of its new found superior strength even though neighboring countries did. Despite their many contributions to society, the Romans were never noted for their intellectual expediency. So it is not all that odd that for such a long time

Rome experienced the strain of widespread unrest that so often accompanies an expanding empire.

The century of increased annexation prior to 146 would eventually induce Rome to readjust her political thinking. The city-state government so long ago established to govern the Italian peninsula was not equipped to stand up to the task of administration abroad. Rome had acquired six new provinces in less than one hundred years, yet failed to revise her rigid constitutional arrangement to reflect this accumulation of territory. ³ These newly acquired provinces were simply patrolled by Rome's military. Absolutely no consideration was given to political administration at this time. This Roman policy of occupation did little to resolve the Republic's difficulties with its newfound territories.

After 146 B.C. Rome was at the brink of a new era as the most dominant power in the Mediterranean world. Rome's future would be determined by how it adjusted to this newly acquired position of dominance. Unfortunately, the stubbornness of the ruling class exhibited itself in an incapacity to adapt, socially, economically and politically, the policies of the Republic to the changing needs of a growing empire. Once a military empire ceases to expand, the most common result is increased civil strife and violence. The late Roman Republic is certainly no exception to this rule. Rome had for centuries lived as a military society enhanced further by each and every conquest. Rome had funnelled its aggression into a form of military expression that yielded it the Mediterranean world.

Yet, once this feat had been accomplished, Rome's military began to stagnate and no outlet remained by which to vent frustrations nor acquire wealth. Perhaps this was the fate of which Scipio Africanus had forewarned upon his defeat of Carthage. It is as well the reason he did not destroy this rival city to Rome. For as long as there was an outside threat to Rome there would always be a common point of focus for every aspect of society--"Carthago delenda est." It is somewhat ironic that Rome's ascendance to world dominance marks the beginning of the Republic's demise.

The century of violence most commonly called the "Roman Revolution" was what ensued. It is generally accepted that it began with the death of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. and ended with the death of Marc Antony and the ascendance of Octavian as Caesar in 30 B.C.⁴ The Roman Revolution did begin with the death of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. On this point all ancient historians agree. However, there is some speculation as to the revolution's ending date. The more appropriate end of the Roman Republic should be with the death of Cicero in 43 B.C., for he was truly the last Roman republican. The later struggles of Octavian and Marc Antony had little to do with republican politics but were merely battles for control of the state. The "Roman Revolution" has received a great deal of attention as to its causes and effects, but the event which most properly marks its cessation has been greatly overshadowed. With the death of Cicero the revolution had come full circle and the transition of power was complete. The Senate had succumbed

to ambitious military politicians. The two events that most appropriately represent the beginning and end of this process are the deaths of Tiberius Gracchus (133 B.C.) and Cicero (43 B.C.). Each man died at the hands of the two opposite factions that ultimately tore the Republic apart.

The first of these two factions was the oligarchy (the Senate). They slew not only Tiberius in 133 B.C., but also his brilliant younger brother, Gaius, in 121 and Caesar in 44. The Senate was comprised of embittered aristocrats who, for various reasons, were losing control of their capacity to dominate Roman politics. By the time Tiberius Gracchus rose to the heights of power, the three hundred member Senate held fast to their domination of politics through customs rather than laws.⁵ This had been the way of Roman politics since the Republic's inception. The Senate was held in such high esteem that their word was regarded as absolute, even though there was no written acknowledgment of this practice. Tiberius and his successors became a threat not so much to the senators themselves but to these customs by which they governed.

The second faction was Rome's military leaders. These commanders began to seize their opportunities with increasing frequency in the turmoil of the first century B.C. Tiberius Gracchus unknowingly set a precedent when he challenged the authority of the Senate, thus revealing its "Achilles' heel": their power was based on custom, not law. Each generation after Tiberius saw a new military leader who further challenged senatorial power. The struggle between the oligarchy and the

military leaders left the Republic to die a slow and agonizing death.

Most ancient historiography claims that the "Roman Revolution" ushered in a wave of violence that eroded a highly civilized culture. In actuality, violence had always been a very integral part of Roman society. Violence was actually considered a form of self-help in private disputes.⁶ If an issue could not be settled constitutionally, violence generally ensued. The term "libertas" meant that a man could use force in his personal interests to secure his proper dues.⁷ In the works of Livy, Polybius, Tacitus, and even Cicero references are constantly made to this traditional form of self-help. This was no more than an expression of community spirit which had survived the ages. While new territories and provinces did have some effect upon the application of violence to settle disputes, the idea of immediate vindication provided a quick yet violent solution. This process was considered a form of fidelity to Rome to prevent a breach of peace or an overburdened judicial system.⁸

What happened after 133 B.C. (and the death of Tiberius Gracchus) was the logical progression of violence to the next plateau of Roman society: politics. Even Cicero encouraged violence, "if undertaken by good men in defense of the established order against those who improperly sought to disturb it."⁹ Herein lies the problem. The constitution and Senate of Rome left little room for compromise. The type of popular legislation first proposed by Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. was

a direct challenge to senatorial rule. Thus, popular legislation was met by violence from the Senate as its only recourse toward seeking proper dues. Perhaps a closer look at the Senate will help determine just exactly what were its "proper dues!"

It has long been maintained that the study of any society involves the examination of its ruling class. Therefore, the study of the Roman Republic involves the Senate. In the second century B.C. Polybius accurately claimed, "the Senate was the body that ruled the Roman world." ¹⁰ A century later Cicero wrote, "the Senate was intended to be the savior, defender, and protector of the state." ¹¹ Sallust called the ruling class "an oligarchy that managed affairs at home and in war; it held the treasury, the provinces, the public office and military glory, but the noble families that once dominated the Senate by public merit now did by inherited influence." ¹² In other words, the Romans were becoming a race of adopted peoples. By the first century B.C., one-fourth to one-half of senatorial families had no son survive long enough to seek political office, and not all of the surviving sons had the inclination or ability to enter politics. ¹³ The Senate had no alternative but to recruit members from outside the upper echelons of society to replace themselves.

This upset not only the social ladder of Rome but also the long standing patron-client relationship. The client was a man of inferior status who depended on his patron for personal and economic protection; in return, he was expected to serve the

needs of his patron.¹⁴ Patronage as a link between men of higher and lower status was part of the political structure. In Rome emphasis was placed on the "duties" of the individual rather than on the "rights." No Roman considered all people to be born free and equal in dignity and rights. The idea of patronage had been part of the social and political structure for years. Yet the men who should have defended this way of life (the senators) were declining steadily in number and influence both prior to and after 133 B.C.

Tiberius Gracchus had a dramatic impact upon the procedures by which the oligarchy governed. During the 130's B.C., secret ballots replaced traditional voice votes.¹⁵ However, to admit the development of a crisis in social conditions would be a condemnation of the manner in which the oligarchy conducted politics. The Senate refused to believe that they did not dominate the politics of the day. In essence their position was weakening and Tiberius Gracchus exposed this harsh reality by turning to popular politics when he was opposed by the Senate.

The heart of the political turmoil between Tiberius and the Senate lay in his land redistribution proposal. Tiberius wanted to redistribute Italian land to help the plebeians establish farms of a large enough area to be considered eligible for military service so that they might replenish the depleted Roman ranks. Also, Tiberius had hopes of reuniting many dispossessed Italians with their native soil.¹⁶ This would ease social tensions in Rome while bolstering the numbers in the military. The oligarchy despised Tiberius' plan because it meant that the

Senate would have to relinquish a great deal of profitable land which had been accumulated by exploitation of the peasant class. Redistribution would cut directly into the profits of the oligarchy. It also meant that Tiberius would be establishing for himself a vast constituency of plebeians primarily loyal to him. This proposed redistribution of land would not only threaten the oligarchic financial situation but their political power base as well. So the Senate opposed Tiberius, who in turn resorted to popular politics.

Tiberius Gracchus destroyed Rome's traditional political system. As a member of the governing class, yet opposed to the Senate, he sought public opinion as a force to enhance the authority of the populace as a useful political tool. He gave the popular assembly the status to rival the Senate as a source of political authority. His actions established new patterns of activity later used by other politicians. Tiberius attacked the oligarchy's political as well as financial framework. Tiberius was opposed and defeated by Octavius in the consular election of 133 B.C. He was opposed by the entire Senate, who combined forces with Octavius in an effort to remove him from political power. However, Tiberius used the popular assembly to depose the consul Octavius and restricted the oligarchy's constitutional ability to respond to his methods. ¹⁷

The oligarchy had no recourse left available to them. Being forced into such a politically competitive situation, they responded with an age old custom used for settling personal

disputes. The Senate resorted to violence and informally killed Tiberius Gracchus and many of his followers. 18

Consequently, Tiberius is wrongfully credited with the legacy of initiating a century's violence commonly called the "Roman Revolution" even though it was the first civil bloodshed since the kings had been expelled from Rome four hundred years earlier. Tiberius is not responsible for the initiation of violence, for that was a custom which had long accompanied republican life. Tiberius did, however, transfer that violence from the personal realm to the political. By destroying the traditional political system, Tiberius promoted political competition that was much more intense than previously known. Self-help emerged as a new political tool and violence increased as a means of achieving political goals.

Tiberius transposed an intense dual party system into republican politics which contributed as much as any other factor to the Republic's eventual demise. In 133 B.C., political battle lines were drawn between the oligarchy and what has come to be known as the populares. The oligarchy were Rome's leading citizens, the nobility who controlled the Senate. The populares have most often been portrayed as the popular assembly, but this is somewhat misleading. The opposition to the oligarchy was actually not a group at all but ambitious individuals who used the consulship or tribunate to take their policies directly to the popular assemblies. 19 The uneducated masses were much easier to manipulate than the Senate, and much less expensive. In essence, the struggle between the populares

and oligarchy was symbolic of the greater struggle between the oligarchy and the military leaders.

The turmoil of the late Republic was not simply patrician against plebeian. As has already been noted, there had for centuries prior to 133 B.C. been an equitable patron-client relationship in Rome. So the plausibility of a sudden social breakdown in exactly 133 B.C. is unlikely. What is more apt to have happened was the manipulation of the popular assembly by overly ambitious politicians, who had neither the patience nor the clientage to endure the Republic's traditional political avenues. The oligarchy had always successfully controlled republican politics and it was only after Tiberius' failure to manipulate the oligarchy that he turned to popular support. Many others would follow his example.

In as much as Tiberius' popular politics set a precedent that threatened the Republic, so too did the Senate with its use of violence to resolve this political threat. Constitutional incompatibility is often the prelude to revolution and the situation in Rome was more complex than the Senate could comprehend. By killing Tiberius Gracchus, the Senate set themselves up for further reprisals at the hands of his younger brother, Gaius. When Gaius followed his elder brother's example and attempted to usurp the power of the Senate, they once again resorted to violence and killed the younger Gracchus.

There is one principle difference in the Senate's actions toward Gaius as compared to his elder brother. In Gaius' case

the Senate adapted their emergency powers to this cause and, in 121 B.C., issued for the first time "the ultimate decree" (Senatus Consultum Ultimum). Plainly stated, the ultimate decree said "that there was a threat to society of so great a magnitude that it required Rome's magistrates to take whatever steps needed to ensure that the Republic came to no harm." ²⁰ The Senate thus granted the noble Opimius absolute control of the state (by virtue of the ultimate decree) and he in turn formally killed Gaius Gracchus. ²¹ So, while Tiberius died due to an overly emotional violent response of the Senate, Gaius died due to a coldly calculated and executed decree.

The difference between a formal and an informal death probably meant little to the Gracchi, but the implications of the latter upon the Senate were catastrophic. In their attempt to curb the advent of a dictator leading the popular assembly against them, the Senate created the legitimate position of dictator. The "ultimate decree" gave absolute power to an individual to protect the state. Later in the first century B.C., it is not clear whether state or individual interests took precedent. The Senate's paranoia of a popular assembly rivaling its power caused it to overlook the obvious. The popular assembly was not so much a united political force but rather an organization manipulated by individuals to rival senatorial authority. Gaius, like Tiberius before him, was searching for a way to dictate Roman politics. The Senate, by preventing Gaius Gracchus from achieving this feat, through the violence of the

ultimate decree, provided the vehicle and the opportunity for future generations to become dictators over Roman politics.

For the next eighty years, after the death of Gaius Gracchus, violent power struggles dominated Roman politics. Marius defeated the northern hordes and was named "Third Founder of the City (Rome) in 102 B.C." ²² Within fifteen years Marius marched against Rome as an enemy of the state and was conquered by Sulla. ²³ With the death of Marius and ascendance of Sulla, Plutarch wrote, "even the most stupid of Romans understood that they had merely exchanged, not escaped tyranny." ²⁴ Pompey succeeded Sulla, and Caesar conquered Pompey. All of these men possessed military commands, all marched on Rome, and all were succeeded by yet another military leader. Even Caesar was followed by Antony who eventually yielded to Octavian.

By the first century B.C. the Roman Republic was dominated by military politics. One general succeeded another, and whether they defended the Senate or the popular assembly made little difference: "might made right." The only thing accomplished by these senatorially produced factional politics was that they gave any general who so desired a cause for which to fight. The cause made little difference as well. The accumulation of power was all that concerned any of the aforementioned generals.

The Senate, in dealing with the Gracchi, unknowingly provided the perfect opportunity by which to conquer their very own Republic. By ushering violence onto the political arena, the Senate set a precedent in which Roman politicians killed off

all competition. The Senate committed the gravest of all tragedies, for out of concern for their own survival they created the means of their own destruction.

While the Senate remained technically intact until the rise of Augustus, their power and influence had long since faded. The only action of any consequence taken by the Senate in the entire first century B.C. was the murder of Julius Caesar. Unfortunately for the Senate, by that time Rome's political destiny was inevitable. The senators who murdered Caesar were the same shallow individuals that killed Tiberius Gracchus. All this violence was in the name of an honor which had died with the Gracchi, perhaps earlier. These were not the leaders who built the Republic, nor were they capable of saving it. Cicero most accurately assessed the situation; "our traditions once produced great men and great men maintained the traditions. Now we have lost the color and even the outline of the picture. The traditions are forgotten for we lack the men. It is our crime that the state stands only in name." 25

When the Republic needed strength and leadership most, the Senate could not have been weaker or more corrupt. The most industrious minds of the entire first century circumvented the Senate in favor of a military command. The prestige of senatorial tradition yielded to the force of arms. Once their credibility had been challenged, the Senate lost control of the state's destiny as well as their own. They possessed neither the power nor the conviction of spirit to sustain the heritage of their ancestors.

The addition of three hundred new members to the Senate by Sulla in 81 B.C. obviously did not help matters in the Senate.²⁶ In fact, this act created so much dissention and confusion that the Senate's effectiveness as a legislative body vanished. Such was the technique of the first century military commanders. They weakened the Senate in order to strengthen themselves. Republican politics was reduced to corruption and compromise. The temporary delicate position of the state's supreme military commander once established by Cincinnatus had reverted back to the status of tyrant. Although the Senate recognized this potential tyrannical threat as early as 133 B.C., its members refused to jeopardize their own lavish lifestyles to prevent its occurrence. Instead they created a dictator to slay a tyrant. Vengeance became the mainstay of Roman politics. One violent insurrection followed another until the ideals upon which the Republic was founded deserted nearly all Senators, save for Cicero.

Cicero was unlike most first century Roman senators in that most of his thinking was greatly influenced by the Greek philosophic tradition. Shortly after Rome's conquest of Macedon and Corinth, literary activity in Rome greatly increased. In the first century B.C. any politician of rhetorical prowess (like Cicero) drew a great deal of public notice. Cicero took advantage of this situation and entered the political arena where his fame and reputation grew beyond reproach. Cicero believed that men were born for justice which in turn should express itself in law and that law was for public promotion of

justice rather than the benefit of any group or individual. ²⁷ Cicero viewed lawlessness as the creator of tyranny under which no state could exist in its proper form, because the essential characteristic of a state was law. According to Cicero the tyrant was any man who seized power illegally or ruled in opposition to the constitution of the state, and the slaying of that tyrant was not just the right thing to do but the duty of a good citizen. ²⁸ Cicero adopted a great deal of his ethical ideals from Plato's Republic and attempted to apply them to Rome's political situation in a futile attempt to salvage an already corrupt society.

While Cicero understood the deplorable status of the Republic, he refused to abandon the hopes for its revival. Cicero's dream to restore the Republic (through the Senate) created much turmoil with Julius Caesar. Cicero believed in one view of the constitution and Caesar quite a different one. Cicero believed in senatorial prerogatives while Caesar did not. Cicero thus labeled Caesar a tyrant, for what he called "opposition to the constitution or rather the institution of the state." ²⁹ Rome had submitted to a government led by military dictators before (such as Marius, Sulla, and Pompey). Yet the Senate considered these situations temporary. Neither Cicero nor the Senate was quite ready to accept Caesar's blatant attempt to become dictator for life.

Caesar on the other hand must have known that his death would not serve his enemies well. He knew that Antony or Octavian would fill his shoes, avenge his death, and seize the

state. Unfortunately, the complacent Caesar failed to recognize the shortsightedness of his foes, who by killing him hoped to restore the Republic. Though Cicero did not take part in the murder, he condoned it. In his Second Phillipic, Cicero wrote, "this is the first occasion when a man has been killed who was not aiming at kingly power but exercising it." ³⁰ Cicero and the oligarchy viewed the death of Caesar much in the same light as they had the death of Tiberius Gracchus some ninety years prior --as a fine and noble deed.

Upon the death of Caesar a power struggle ensued in which Cicero made a futile effort to reestablish a long deceased Republic. Cicero hoped to control state politics through public oratory. He held assemblies through which he procured arms by inducing the weapon makers to work without pay. He also collected money and exacted contributions from various allies in an effort to rebuild a Senatorial Republic. Given more time Cicero may have been successful. However, when Publius Ventidius defected to Antony, Cicero lost two legions and all hope of victory. ³¹ Despite all his efforts, Cicero was no match for the military leaders and their armies. The same could be said of the entire Senate. In 43 B.C. Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus formed the Second Triumvirate, thus combining their military might to one end--the elimination of all their opposition, starting with Cicero. ³² Some years before when asked by Caesar to support the First Triumvirate, Cicero refused because of his suspicion that the Triumvirate would not respect the traditions of the Republic. ³³ Cicero's convictions were

later confirmed, but the brilliant statesman had missed Caesar's point. The Republic was ruined and its city-state structure incapable of ruling the vast empire that Rome had come to be. But Cicero, one of the Republic's most brilliant senators, refused to accept the inevitability of its demise.

Cicero fought against the Cataline conspiracy and later the First Triumvirate.³⁴ His literary genius allowed him to record the Republic in its purest form in De Re Publica and to codify Roman law in De Legibus. His brilliance alone did more to further Roman republican civilization than any of his contemporaries or predecessors. Even upon his death Cicero refused to affiliate himself with any one political faction. Despite the immense political corruption of the first century B.C., he never sought power for his own behalf. Cicero embodied steadfast Roman principles and was truly the last, if not the greatest, republican. However, that in itself was not enough to alter the destiny of the collapsing Republic.

Cicero died on December 7, 43 B.C., at the hands of a gladiator whom he had once defended and exonerated. "His head and hands were brought back to Antony ... who placed them at the head of his table so that he might gaze upon them during his meals."³⁵ Such has been the fate of many great cultures to fall at the hands of those less civilized than themselves.

It took a little more than a decade after Cicero's death, but the matter of Rome's leadership was finally settled, for the fate of the Republic had long since been decided. Marc Antony and Octavian fell upon each other in a struggle for absolute

control of the state. The victor, Octavian, later named himself Caesar Augustus and broke with all pre-existing forms of government. Though Rome survived for another half millennium it's people never again experienced the freedom they once enjoyed under the Republic.

The struggle for the senatorially controlled Republic that had begun with Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. ended with the death of Cicero in 43 B.C. Cicero was the last man to define and defend republican ideals. His dedication was to his country and not to a political faction. The love he had for the Republic was exhibited in his staunch defense of it. He opposed Sulla, Cataline, Caesar, Antony and Octavian, yet never was he named to a faction that sought power for the sake of power itself. Unfortunately for Cicero, this was also his undoing for he had no power base (other than the Senate) by which to rival these all powerful military leaders. Tiberius had pointed out some ninety years earlier that the Senate ruled primarily by custom. By Cicero's time, the Senate's function had become almost completely advisory. The real power in the state lay in the military and the generals who led them. Cicero was born into an era of power politics and although his desires to retain the Republic were quite sincere, they were equally impossible. The Republic had died somewhere in the first century B.C., either with Marius, Sulla, Pompey or Caesar. With the death of Cicero in 43 B.C. the transformation had been completed and the only question that remained was which dictator would prevail.

Endnotes

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² A. H. McDonald, Republican Rome (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966) 134.

³ H. H. Scullard, From Gracchi to Nero (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959) 5.

⁴ Stewart Perowne, Death of the Roman Republic (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1968) 269.

⁵ Scullard, 7.

⁶ A. W. Lintott, Violence in Republican Rome (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 175.

⁷ Lintott, 205.

⁸ Lintott, 16.

⁹ Lintott, 175.

¹⁰ M. Beard and M. Crawford, Rome in the Late Republic (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 59.

¹¹ Beard, 59.

¹² McDonald, 135.

¹³ Beard, 46.

¹⁴ Beard, 63.

¹⁵ A. H. Bernstein, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus: Tradition and Apostasy (New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) 228.

¹⁶ Beard, 7.

¹⁷ Perowne, 71.

¹⁸ McDonald, 138.

¹⁹ McDonald, 139.

- 20 David Stockton, The Gracchi (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 199.
- 21 Stockton, 199
- 22 Perowne, 87.
- 23 Perowne, 107.
- 24 Plutarch, Parallel Lives, Volume 6, Chapter 4.
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- 28 Frank B. Marsh, The Founding of the Roman Empire (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, Ltd., 1959) 175.
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